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Primary and secondary effects of social origins on educational transitions

Abstract

Two mechanisms give rise to social selection in the educational system: children from higher classes perform better at school than children from the working class and they continue more to academic educational tracks than working class kids, even at the same level of performance. Boudon labelled these two mechanisms primary and secondary effects. The attached figure shows how these two effects operate for boys born 1967 leaving compulsory school in 1983. The bell shaped curves represent grade point averages for boys from the upper middle class and the working class respectively. The primary effect is from the figure clear in that boys from the upper middle class on average have higher grades. The S-shaped curves indicate the transition probabilities at given grade point averages for boys from the two classes. The secondary effect is demonstrated by the curve for boys from the upper middle class clearly lying above that for those from the working class. Primary and secondary effects can be estimated from the data giving rise to the curves in the figure and change can thus be estimated from comparisons with corresponding data from another year.

Based on a data set with information on school careers of two birth cohorts, it is in this presentation shown that social inequality in the transition from elementary school to upper secondary decreased in Sweden from 1983 to 1998, i.e. among those born 1967 and 1982, respectively. This decrease was dependent both on decreasing primary and secondary effects. Secondary effects appear as smaller if grades are used as measures of performance rather than test results from an earlier age. This is presumably due to

anticipated decisions on educational continuation made in elementary school and on the supportive effect of receiving high grades and the discouraging effect of low grades. The degree of social selection is lower among girls but the patterns are otherwise about the same for the two sexes.

Grade point average at end of primary school by social origin and transition probability to academic secondary school by social origin and GPA.
Boys born 1967. N=1859.

